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The Origins of *La Vie neutre*:

Nicolas Caussin's influence on the writings of Gabrielle Suchon

Reluctant nun, philosopher, precursor of feminism, Gabrielle Suchon was forgotten for the best part of three centuries. Her writings, published at the very end of the seventeenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth century, examined the place of women in society in relation to philosophical and religious concepts of freedom, knowledge and power, offered a reappraisal of gender relations and proposed a new social status for women. Yet neither the philosophers of the Enlightenment nor the feminist theorists of the twentieth century seem aware of her work. While she has recently been the object of renewed interest, the most striking aspect of her 're-discovery' in the last twenty years is the extent to which she has divided critics: for some, who see the extent of her reference to Ancient and Christian texts as a lack of assurance and an impediment to a truly 'feminist' stance (Hoffmann, Fauré), Suchon is a disappointment. For others (Auffret, Geffriaud Rosso, Le Doeuff), she is a truly radical thinker, advancing original ideas and challenging contemporary thought on gender and politics.ⁱ In both cases, these conclusions are based in part on the author's use of the sources available to her. However, one source, which may give us a more balanced view of Suchon's originality, seems to have remained undetected. The main focus of this article is to bring this new evidence to light, in particular regarding her concept of *vie neutre* and its relation to Nicolas Caussin's use of the same term. I hope that this will enable us, in the long term, to establish clearly what Suchon's choice of sources may tell us about her position as a Christian philosopher, what innovative ideas she may have brought to an already long running and convoluted

debate, and give her the place she deserves in the *Querelle des Femmes*. Unlike some of the critics mentioned above, I would contend that she was neither blind follower nor revolutionary luminary but rather a woman influenced by her times, education and experience who none the less dared to put forward a learned and thoughtful argument in favour of gender equality. I will argue that Suchon raises to a political level a debate which was often more concerned with style than with a true assessment of gender issues and in almost all cases stopped short of advocating real changes regarding the place of women in society.

Suchon is the author of two treatises, published towards the end of her life. The first, *Traité de la morale et de la politique*, appeared in 1693 under the pseudonym G. S. Aristophile. The *Traité* is divided into three parts (*La Liberté*, *L'Autorité* and *La Science*), each of those divided into two sections: the first in praise of each of the topics, the second a demonstration of the terrible effects of being deprived of freedom, authority and knowledge. While the general impression given by the title is that of a wide-ranging philosophical discussion, a closer look reveals the full title of the book to be *Traité de la morale et de la politique, divisé en trois parties. Scavoir La liberté, La Science et L'Autorité ou l'on voit que les personnes du Sexe pour en être privées, ne laissent pas d'avoir une capacité Naturelle, qui les en peut rendre participantes*. This is followed in the original edition by a shorter essay entitled *Le Petit Traité de la faiblesse, de la légèreté et de l'inconstance qu'on attribue aux femmes mal à propos*. Unlike other *Querelle* texts, the short title which appears on the cover does not immediately position the work as specifically in defense or praise of women but suggests a rather more balanced approach. This is perhaps misleading: while Suchon does attempt to present and analyze as many of the arguments presented in the *Querelle* as possible and professes to approach them all

with equal rationality, she makes it clear in her *Préface* that the *Traité* is meant primarily to be read by women. Its aims are to shake them out of the apathy to which their subjection has led and to arm them in their fight to acquire education and independence.

The second, *Du Célibat volontaire ou La Vie sans engagement*, came out in 1700 and is also divided into three parts, the first two being an argumentative and philosophical defense of secular celibacy or *la vie neutre*, and the third a series of advice on the tasks, duties and general demeanor of those who choose this lifestyle. The *Neutraliste* is a person, and more likely a woman, who is not called to the religious life but chooses to remain unmarried in order to dedicate herself to study, charitable works and contemplation, without submitting to any authority but that of her own reason and vocation.

The works are not greatly original in style. Like most *Querelle* and later moralistic texts, they rely on authority (quotes from ancient texts, both religious and secular), example (*Femmes Illustres*) and ratiocination. They are however rather more original than the *galant* or merely rhetorical celebrations of women by male authors and far wider in scope than previous works by women. In *Le Traité*, Suchon puts forward the thesis that women have been deprived of knowledge in order to keep them subservient with the ultimate aim of ensuring that they cannot accede to power. We can therefore understand from this that Suchon sees male domination as a political strategy and attempts to counteract it by giving her female reader the courage, moral arguments and practical advice necessary to embrace and defend *la vie neutre*, at a time when independent and educated women were regarded as oddities and open to derision, suspicion and persecution from their contemporaries, the state and the Church.

Suchon's entire *œuvre* can be seen to be a product of both the long tradition of *défense des femmes*, which started with Christine de Pizan, and of the moralistic literature that continued well into the 18th century. Her project however is more focused in its aims and far more extensive in its arguments than most of those that come before and it has potentially far more wide reaching social implications. The originality and interest of Suchon's work rests on her attempt to summarize and organize a multitude of religious, philosophical and social arguments in order to propose an innovative solution to the subjugation of women and to produce a set of rhetorical 'weapons' for women to fight against the subservience in which they are unfairly maintained. In this she stands apart from most of her predecessors in a genre which, according to MacLean, 'is written to amuse its readers rather than persuade them.'ⁱⁱ

Despite this (or perhaps because of it) Suchon fell into near oblivion soon after her death. Thanks to the efforts of Séverine Auffretⁱⁱⁱ, she has at last come again to the attention of readers and researchers but many questions remain unanswered, regarding in particular the sources of Suchon's knowledge and its acquisition. Most of Suchon's sources are relatively easy to trace. The religious references are generally clearly indicated by marginal notes, often giving chapter and verse, as well as title. Whether her reliance on such ancient and respected sources constitutes, as argued by Hoffmann, a mark of 'fidéisme'^{iv} and an obstacle to a truly original and political outlook is highly questionable. Suchon is clearly selective in her choice and use of quotations, and her reliance on sources respected by her peers, far from being a mere craven attempt at validation, can be seen as strategic, with the author deliberately choosing arguments from the very same sources used by the detractors of women to expose their inconsistencies, situate their attacks in the context of their time and

perhaps show that even famous critics of women have, at times, been compelled to recognize their intellectual and spiritual qualities.

Her use of modern authors is also more extensive and more ambiguous than has been previously stated. Assertions such as Geffriaud Rosso's comment that 'à part Pascal, il n'est à travers son ouvrage aucune trace de ses contemporains' must be challenged.^v While it is true that Suchon names the work rather than the author, it must be remembered that this is contemporary practice and that some texts (Poullain de la Barre's *Égalité des deux sexes*, for example) were originally published anonymously. So while direct quotations or paraphrases are introduced by a mere 'un Moderne a dit' or 'selon un auteur de ce siècle', both the *Préface Générale* and marginal notes give us a more precise idea of the works to which she refers. In the *Préface générale* to the *Traité*, she cites *Les Femmes fortes*, *Les [Femmes] illustres*, *L'Honnête femme* and *L'Égalité des deux sexes*. This clearly refers to works by, respectively, Le Moyne (1647), Madeleine de Scudéry (1642)^{vi} and Du Bosc (1662), as well of course as Poullain's work of 1673. We also find occasional marginal notes identifying specific references to their works.^{vii} It is clear therefore that Suchon was neither unaware of her contemporaries, nor shy about letting her readers (or the censor) know about the sources of her inspiration.

Identifying unnamed sources is more problematic. It is clear that Suchon, a fervent reader, would have been familiar with many arguments of *La Querelle*.^{viii} However, opinions and pronouncements from both sides of the dispute were repeated, plagiarized and disseminated in a large number of works over the years, from short *harangues* to *traités*, from marriage manuals to novels, making it difficult to identify more precisely what Suchon may have read. In fact, one very probable and crucial source for Suchon's work, and in particular for her second treatise, *Le Célibat*

volontaire, seems to have escaped notice. Geffriaud Rosso's belief that Suchon was the first to use the term *neutraliste* in the context of *Le Célibat* may be misguided.^{ix} Timmermans alludes to a precedent for *la vie neutre* in a footnote: 'P. Caussin a consacré un traité au même sujet: *La Vie neutre des filles dévotes qui font état de n'être ni mariées, ni religieuses* (Paris, 1644, ouvrage signalé dans LA PORTE (A.) *Bibliographie clérico-galante*, M. A. Laporte, 1879, p. 45)' but was unable to find any trace of this work (she simply states: 'nous ne l'avons pas trouvé.')x It may be a reference to a particular edition of the whole or part of the text no longer extant but it is also possible that Timmermans was led astray by poor editing in her source since a rather similar phrase appears in the subtitle of Caussin's *La Vie de Sainte Isabelle*. The earliest edition found in the BNF dates from 1643 and its full title reads: *La Vie de Sainte Isabelle, soeur du Roy Saint Loy et Fondatrice du Monastère Royal de Long-champ, Qui a donné un parfait exemple de la vie neutre des personnes non Mariées ny Religieuses*. This book may indeed be one of the most important sources of inspiration for Suchon. The term *vie neutre* first appears in the letter allegedly sent to Isabelle by Pope Innocent IV to convince her to obey her parents and marry ('Je suis informé [que] vous n'avez point d'intention d'entrer en un monastère pour y vivre dans la profession religieuse, mais que votre esprit se forme une **vie neutre** qui n'est pas ordinaire dans le siècle.' *Sainte Isabelle*, pp. 38-9) More importantly though, what appears at first to be a mere account of Sainte Isabelle's life, segues halfway through into a thirty-odd pages 'mini treatise' on celibacy which opens with the explanation:

Un sujet si spécieux, & dans une personne de si haute considération m'oblige à m'étendre sur la condition de la vie neutre laquelle fait profession de n'être ni au

mariage, ni à la religion, mais de suivre une voie mitoyenne qui ait quelque participation des deux.’ (*Sainte Isabelle*, p. 67)^{xi}

Caussin was a Jesuit priest and moralist. Born in 1583, he was summoned to court by Richelieu when Louis XIII came to the throne, to act as the king’s confessor and *directeur* but his advice soon displeased the minister. He was banished to Quimper-Corentin where he stayed until Richelieu’s death in 1643. A prolific and popular writer (there are over seventy documents, including re-editions, held at the *Bibliothèque Nationale de France*), his best known work, besides the *Sainte Isabelle*, being *La Cour Sainte*. The first edition of *La Cour Sainte* dates from 1624, with numerous re-editions appearing throughout the following years (into the late 1660’s) and translations as late as 1815 (Dublin).^{xii} This vast work includes moral maxims, *exemples illustres* and devotional advice.

It is clear that Suchon was familiar with Caussin’s work as his name appears in a marginal note in *La Science*, p. 252. Yet a closer look suggests that his influence on Suchon goes much further than suggested by this single acknowledgment. His work can be traced as the source of numerous points which are merely accompanied by the sibylline mention of ‘un Moderne’: on page 379 of *Le Célibat*, Suchon states that ‘un auteur de ce temps dit à ce sujet que de tous les maux de l’homme, il n’y en a point de plus fâcheux que l’homme même, d’autant que c’est lui qui fait les guerres, les meurtres, les poisons, & mille autres malheurs que l’on voit sur terre’, a close paraphrase of Caussin statement: ‘il faut avouer que de tous les maux de l’homme, il n’y en a point de pire que l’homme. C’est lui qui fait les guerres et les naufrages, les meurtres et les poisons, lui qui brûle les maisons et les villes entières, lui qui fait des déserts des plus florissantes provinces.’ (*La Cour sainte*, Vol. 1, p. 165) Similarly,

‘Un Moderne a eu raison de dire, que Dieu n’a point de plus glorieux spectacle sur la Terre, qu’un homme juste, affligé & patient’ (*Célibat*, p. 634) can be traced back to *La Cour sainte* (Vol. 1, p. 121).

A rather more substantial element borrowed from Caussin can also be found in the chapter on Devotion in *Le Célibat*, which gives a clear classification of the various types of religious devotion. Suchon states:

Un savant Moderne en a remarqué de trois sortes: il fait consister la première en pénitences, austérité & macérations corporelles, qui par cette raison retient le nom de rude et sévère. La seconde dévotion, qui s’appelle délicate, recherche les moyens d’accorder dieu et le monde, & de rendre ses Partisans sensuels et dévots tout ensembles. La troisième, que l’on nomme transcendantale, fait profession de suivre des chemins écartés, & de raffiner sur les autres Dévotions par des spéculations d’esprit, auxquelles très peu de personnes sont capables de parvenir. (p. 448)

This classification is found in *La Cour Sainte* and Suchon does not elaborate on this but, like Caussin, she advises against those three forms of devotions in favour of a fourth, more ‘genuine’ or *solide* form of worship for the *Neutralistes*, ‘lesquelles ne doivent pas maltraiter indiscrètement leur corps, ni le flatter délicatement, ni encore moins, donner de la présomption à leur esprit, par la recherche trop curieuse d’une voie transcendante, plus propre à faire naître l’orgueil, qu’à produire l’humilité’ (pp. 448-9).

Further comparison between the texts shows that Caussin’s influence was much more extensive than even these few quotations would suggest: a close look at the Jesuit’s work shows a deep intellectual and spiritual affinity between the two

authors. Even when Suchon does not quote Caussin specifically, it is hard not to see in some of her arguments an extension of those developed more briefly in Caussin and it could be argued that *Le Célibat volontaire* is to a large extent a more lengthy and elaborate version of the passage on *la vie neutre* found in *La Vie de Sainte Isabelle*, supported by much of the advice given and the principles established in *La Cour Sainte*.

It is therefore no surprise to see her use the term *neutre* as the building block of her treatise on *Le Célibat*. Caussin is one of the few contemporary writers who seem to see secular celibacy as a valid alternative to marriage and vows for women. He insists on their status as individuals endowed with reason and therefore able to choose the course of their lives and berates anyone who would force upon them a lifestyle not based on vocation. We can see here the most crucial element of Suchon's project: her insistence on vocation as God-given and on the dangers of going against such a call enables her to present freedom of choice as a spiritual necessity and to establish a distinction between social custom and divine law. Furthermore, Caussin stands out among male writers of the time sympathetic to women in that he writes about celibacy at length and presents it as an acceptable, and even desirable, lifestyle.^{xiii}

Unsurprisingly, therefore, many of the arguments used by Caussin to defend and legitimize celibacy in *La Vie de Sainte Isabelle*, are found in *Le Célibat*. Among those we find Isabelle's use of precedent to justify her choice neither to marry nor to enter orders,^{xiv} the insistence on vocation as the sole determining factor in a choice of lifestyle (in opposition to any parental or social pressure), as well as the notion that to go against that vocation, or act without it, negates the positive aspects of embracing a religious life,^{xv} the denunciation of the financial preoccupations of religious

orders,^{xvi} the advantages of secular celibacy for charity^{xvii} and the social and spiritual advantages of secular celibacy.^{xviii}

Of course the advocates of ‘un mari ou une grille’ would argue that women must be ‘guided’ because of their feeble intellect and weaker nature, so Caussin highlights throughout his argumentation the intellectual and moral abilities of women, positing them as equal to that of men on the basis of a duality between mind and body, as Suchon will later do. He can then state that: ‘C’est violer les droits de la nature, et entreprendre sur un domaine que Dieu a donné si particulièrement à une créature raisonnable, que de pousser par violence une fille au mariage lors qu’elle n’y a aucune volonté.’ (Caussin, *Saint Isabelle*, p. 70) Having exposed the dangers of forced vows and marriages, Caussin states: ‘Ce qui fait conclure qu’une personne qui est en possession de la liberté, & qui n’a nulle disposition à se soumettre aux volontés d’autrui, en ce qui concerne l’usage de sa vie, fait très bien de choisir la neutralité.’ (p. 81)

So it is clear that, like Suchon, Caussin acknowledges the pressures women are under, insists on their intellectual abilities and on the usefulness of *la vie neutre* for society. Whereas Bertolini describes the originality of Suchon’s work as positing, for the first time, the usefulness of women beyond reproduction and religion, we must argue that such a position is already present in Caussin.^{xix}

Significantly, the first book of the first *Traité* of *La Vie Sainte* sets out to show that a spiritual life is open to all, even in the secular world and castigates those who feel that the search for Christian ‘perfection’ is the preserve of those who have entered a religious life:

Et ne voyez-vous pas que c'est une [...] sottise, de penser que la perfection ne soit faite que pour une petite poignée de gens séparés de la vie seculière, puis que tous les Chrétiens portent un même nom, une même livrée, participent à un même Dieu, à de mêmes Sacrements, et prétendent un même Paradis? (p.4)

This insistence on the possibility, and even desirability, of a secular mode of worship is the very premise on which Suchon's *Célibat* is based.

Despite the time that had elapsed between Caussin and Suchon's writings, this still constituted a fairly courageous stance at the end of the 17th century, given the Church's efforts, since the 13th century, to establish and maintain the division between secular and religious lives, especially where women are concerned, in the face of the development of secular religious movements. It is easy to see how Caussin's vision would have appealed to Suchon in her attempts to define and legitimize an alternative status for women based on self-determination, since the convent clearly represented, perhaps even more so than marriage and, possibly because of her own experience, the most blatant deprivation of freedom.

Caussin proceeds with warning and advice on how to maintain a sound spiritual life in the secular world: with chapters dealing with various 'obstacles' to and comments on *les vertus*, *La Cour Sainte* is a mixture of rhetorical arguments and advice on practical issues which immediately calls to mind the format used by Suchon in *Le Célibat volontaire*.

Most importantly perhaps, Caussin states that 'tous les maux nous viennent de l'ignorance, & de la méconnaissance de Dieu: c'est le premier monstre qu'il nous faut combattre, le premier empêchement qu'il nous faut lever' (*La Cour Sainte*, Vol. 1, p. 97). This position could be read as both a incentive and a validation for Suchon's

whole enterprise insofar as she argues that the intellectual development of the individual (training in the sciences, philosophy, theology, accessibility to literature of any kind) and the exercise of free will lead to better spiritual practice. She clearly links the rights she claims for women to the need for them to fulfil their devotional duties to the best of their abilities. The *vie neutre* is intended to provide them with the necessary space to educate themselves, reflect and meditate, thus dispelling their ignorance, not only on a secular level, but also in terms of their ‘méconnaissance de Dieu’. Suchon therefore concludes, rather controversially, that to keep women uneducated and subservient is in effect to deny them the means to reach salvation.

While Caussin does not establish quite as direct a link, he none the less addresses the issue of the subjection of women, the ignorance in which they are kept and the discourse which accompanies male hegemony. In the third book of the first *Traité of La Cour Sainte*, which deals with marriage, for example, he denounces the unreasonable nature of the prejudice against women (‘Les hommes qui veulent toujours conclure à leur avantage [...] rejettent tout sur les femmes [...] Il semble que blamer généralement les femmes, ce soit donner plus de témoignage de sa passion, que de marques de son jugement’, *La Cour Sainte*, Vol.1, p. 153) and argues that ‘les petites mondantés des femmes sont encore plus supportables que ne sont les débauches des maris’ (p. 157). He concludes in any case that ‘la plus grande des perfections est de demeurer dans la viduité’ and presents widows as ‘l’horizon du mariage et de la religion, elles participent aux deux conditions.’ It is only a short step from this to a legitimate third status, secular celibacy, which Suchon will later define more precisely as *Neutralisme*.

It is important to note that while he recommends celibacy, he does not indicate that this should be linked to enclosure. On the contrary, he asserts that ‘ce

n'est pas toujours le plus certain triomphe de la chasteté, que de se priver des instruments du mal... & et personne n'est loué justement, pour avoir l'impuissance de mal faire' (*La Cour Sainte*, Vol. 1, p. 167). Suchon's own arguments in her discussion of the use of convents are based on the same premise. Caussin also notably attacks the use of enclosed orders for punishment or convenience:

Estimez-vous que l'Église soit seule, où il les [sons] faille jeter à l'aveugle, sans choix et sans discrétion? Quel dérèglement de penser qu'il soit loisible de prendre les plus sots & les plus imparfaits pour les faire Prêtres et Religieux? Quelle tyrannie d'en divertir les uns avec toutes sortes d'artifices et de violences, y pousser les autres à la fourche, n'avoir d'autre but en toutes ces procédures que l'accommodement de sa famille, faire plier les lois du ciel sous les intérêts de sa maison, donner à Dieu ce qu'on ne peut loger autre part, & s'il arrive quelque hazard, ôter à Dieu ce qu'on lui a donné?... Il faut nécessairement de la vocation, pour bien réussir dans l'Église.' (*La Cour Sainte*, Vol. 2, p. 519)

His diatribe is clearly echoed in Suchon:

Ce n'est pas aux parents, non plus qu'à toute autre personne, d'immoler des victimes innocentes comme bon leur semble, soit pour la décharge de leur famille, soit pour satisfaire leur ambition, soit pour contenter leur avarice, soit pour assouvir leur vengeance. (*La Contrainte*, ed. by Auffret, p.16)

Dieu ne veut point de ces victimes entachées de vices et de péchés énormes, mais qu'il réprouve celles dont le tempérament trop fort ou trop faible pourrait, dans la

suite du temps, causer de fâcheuses révoltes ou dégénérer de la perfection de cet état, à cause de leur incapacité naturelle qui est souvent presque sans remède, si elle n'est surmontée par une grâce toute-puissante et victorieuse.' (Suchon, *La Contrainte*, ed. by Auffret, p.27)

Both authors present secular celibacy as an assertive and informed, if difficult, choice and Caussin clearly implies that women have the ability and strength to manage their own spiritual and material lives.

His defence of women is at its most obvious in Volume 2 of *La Cour Sainte*, in particular in the *discours* attributed to Euphrosine and addressed to Théophile, her son and emperor of Constantinople. Under the guise of helping him choose the right bride, she attacks those who would criticize women and posits a spiritual equality of the sexes:

Tenons pour une vérité assurée que Dieu, nous ayant créés dans cette égalité des ames, nous avons autant de droits aux connaissances qui nous sont nécessaires à la grace, à la vertu, à la gloire, qu'en pourraient avoir les hommes. (*La Cour Sainte*, Vol. 2, p. 156)

This insistence on the dual nature of mind and body is also central to Suchon's argument. It is obvious that Caussin is not the first to use this notion and it is likely that Suchon, writing at the very end of the Seventeenth century, would have been aware of Descartes's work in this respect. In fact she cites, on a number of occasions, Poullain de la Barre's *Égalité des Sexes*, which is at least as much a demonstration of Cartesian reasoning as it is a defence of women and which develops that same

argument. Similarly, many aspects of Caussin's *Cour Sainte* can be found in any number of religious 'manuals' of the times but the sum of evidence suggests that Suchon found in his writing, not only the basis, but also many of the actual arguments which form her own thesis, as well perhaps as the encouragement needed to launch into her own writing or to make it public.

Caussin's defense of secular celibacy remains fairly short and 'framed' by the life of Isabelle, whereas it constitutes a large part of Suchon's work but it seems very likely from the evidence that she knew the text and was also familiar with, and used, *La Cour Sainte*. We can only speculate that Caussin's *Traité de la Vie Neutre*, if it did indeed exist, would have provided further material for Suchon's *Célibat*.

The question remains as to the reasons for which she did not make this particular influence clearer: Caussin's name appears only once in a marginal note (and we are compelled to wonder why there and not elsewhere?) and the titles of his books are not given anywhere. Two possibilities come to mind: the first is self censorship, but given that other, possibly more controversial authors, are identified (if only by the titles of their works), and that Caussin himself appears as a reference once, this seems unlikely. The other possibility brings us to the mystery of the way in which Suchon acquired her knowledge. If it was through loans or irregular access to friends' libraries, a period of time may have lapsed between her reading of a text and citation of it (it must be remembered that both her treatises were published late in her life and that we have so far no indication of when she may have started writing). This may explain the vagueness of some references (most of them contemporary) compared to the precision of others, namely orthodox religious texts which she may have owned or were easily accessible. There is at this time too little known detail about Suchon's life to offer this explanation as anything more than speculation.

What is obvious is that, although more philosophical, more extensive, more focused (Caussin's writing is aimed at men as much as at women, while Suchon makes it clear in her *Préface* that her intended readership is female), more controversial because of this direct appeal and potentially subversive advice to the female reader, Suchon's two treatises, and *Le Célibat* in particular, owe much to Caussin. This does not devalue the courage it took for her to produce them, the significance of her project or the originality of bringing together for the first time the religious, philosophical, political and social dimensions of a much, and often badly, debated issue and to openly encourage, cautiously but firmly, her female reader to challenge male hegemony.

It is clear that many of the arguments deployed by Caussin himself are fairly unoriginal and have been debated, repeated and plagiarized from the 16th century onwards by the numerous authors who took part in the *Querelle* but it is significant that, unlike most of those authors, Caussin clearly sees *la vie neutre* as a socially valid and spiritually superior alternative to marriage (at least for those who have no vocation to enter orders). None the less, he seems to skip rather quickly over the obstacles put in the way of women wishing to live such a life. In the case of Isabelle, while the pressure to marry would be intense for a royal daughter, she has the education and wit to present her case convincingly. This may not be the case of most women. Suchon, on the other hand, reiterates many of Caussin's arguments but alongside a systematic analysis of the obstacles, both social and political, to this vocation. She exposes the flaws in its opponents' logic and offers a range of arguments to challenge their position. She brings together, like no other author before her, a vast number of points, supporting or refuting them methodically, be they theological, social, legal or merely rhetorical. Overall, most of her argumentation is

based on the dichotomy between the divine (vocation) and the material world (social hierarchy and the duties attached to class), a crucial distinction since it will enable her to show that custom, far from deriving from nature, is in fact constructed with a defined purpose and that this purpose (the subjection of women) is spiritually fraught.

The germs of this dichotomy are present in Caussin, but it is not as clearly presented. None the less, he introduces the notion that the need for obedience, if not mitigated by vocation, is an added burden to conventual life; a point Suchon will develop at length and present as an impediment to spiritual fulfilment, and even as a slippery road to damnation, in the first part of the *Traité (La Contrainte)*. We can see more than chance perhaps in the fact that the very terms employed by Caussin herald the dichotomy on which Part I of the *Traité (La Liberté and La Contrainte)* is based: ‘Ce leur est une gêne perpétuelle, d’être *contraints* aux actions qu’ils pensent louables et honnêtes, & d’abandonner leur *liberté* pour suivre les mouvements d’autrui.’ (p. 76) He develops the idea that ‘peace of mind’ or *repos* is a crucial element of spiritual life and suggests that even taking vows willingly can lead, when one is not called to the religious life, to a state of anxiety (what Suchon will call *le trouble*) which negates all the potential benefits of a contemplative life. Only secular celibacy, he concludes, can remedy this: ‘L’appréhension seule de ne pouvoir persévérer, fait en plusieurs un trouble d’esprit qui n’est pas imaginable. Et qui trouvera mauvais si une fille demeure neutre pour s’en garantir, & s’affermir dans un état assuré?’ (Caussin, *Sainte Isabelle*, p. 82)

Despite his stopping short of giving his female readers the means to defend that position, the similarity of thought and terminology between Caussin and Suchon suggest that his work may have made a significant impact on the development of her theories. She integrates his notion of secular celibacy but presents it in far more

concrete terms and extends it to all women rather than just aristocrats. She addresses the practical issues surrounding this possibility, contextualizing the opposition to it as a deliberate political will to keep women subservient and defining the terms of the potential new status. She is clearly aware that her proposal would have serious social repercussions, hinting that educated and independent women could find their places in all levels of government and even the church, stopping just short of advocating the appointment of female priests – which is perhaps why she hints in her *Préface* that she is not expecting to see such changes in her lifetime or even in the near future. If, as stated by MacLean, ‘only the more enlightened writers had the insight to see the true import of their recommendations’, then Suchon should surely be counted among the enlightened and her place in the corpus of the time reassessed.^{xx}

ⁱ Paul Hoffmann, ‘Le féminisme spirituel de Gabrielle Suchon, *Dix-Septième siècle*, 121 (1978), 269-276; Christine Fauré, *La Démocratie sans les femmes: essai sur le libéralisme en France* (Paris, PUF, 1985), 128-131; Séverine Auffret, in her *Préfaces* to Gabrielle Suchon, *Traité de la morale et de la politique: La Liberté* (Paris, des femmes, 1988), Gabrielle Suchon, *Du Célibat volontaire ou va vie sans engagement* (Paris, Indigo & Côté-femmes, 1994), Gabrielle Suchon, *Traité de la morale et de la politique: La Contrainte* (Paris, Indigo & Côté-femmes, 1999), Gabrielle Suchon, *Le Petit Traité de la faiblesse, de la légèreté et de l’inconstance qu’on attribue aux femmes mal à propos* (Paris, Arléa, 2002); Jeanette Geffriaud Rosso, ‘Gabrielle Suchon: une troisième voie pour la femme?’, in *Ouverture et dialogue: mélanges offerts à Wolfgang Leiner*, Ed. by U. Döring, A. Lyroudias and R. Zaiser (Tübingen, Gunter Narr Verlag, 1988), 669-678 and Michèle Le Dœuff, *Le Sexe du savoir* (Paris, Aubier, 1998).

ⁱⁱ Ian MacLean, *Woman Triumphant: Feminism in French Literature, 1610-1652*

(Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1977), p. 25.

ⁱⁱⁱ Séverine Auffret edited and introduced the only modern editions of Suchon's work. These editions, which all appear in footnote i, are fragments of *Le Traité* and *Le Célibat volontaire*.

^{iv} Paul Hoffmann, p. 272.

^v Geffriaud Rosso, p. 675. This article concentrates on *Le Célibat* and it is true that most, but by no means all, acknowledged contemporary sources are found in *Le Traité*.

^{vi} Elsa Dorlin, *L'Évidence de l'égalité des sexes: une philosophie oubliée du XVII^e siècle* (Paris, L'Harmattan, 2000), states that this refers to *La Galerie des femmes Illustre* (1643) by Francois de Grenaille (p. 39). Ian Maclean in *Woman triumphant* (Oxford 1977), indicates (p. 77) that it is cited in J. Gay's monumental *Bibliographie des ouvrages relatifs au mariage, aux femmes et à l'amour* (Paris, 1897), and that it is possibly a translation of Francesco Pona's *Galeria delle done celebri* (Rome, 1625) but he was unable to track a copy. A copy, published in 1642 in Paris by Gervais Clousier (393 pp, 8°) is to be found in the Universitätsbibliothek Mannheim under the shelf-mark: Sch 091/066 an 1 (thanks to Russell Goulborne for the Maclean reference and to Chris Gossip for the information on locating a copy). While Dorlin's suggestion cannot be entirely ruled out at this point as I have not been able to consult the Mannheim copy, it seems more likely that Suchon refers here to Scudery's *Les Femmes illustres ou Les Harangues héroïques*, which is quoted in other parts of the treatise.

^{vii} *L'Égalité des deux sexes* in *La Science*, avant-propos (no page number) and p. 139, *L'Autorité*: pp. 42, 67, 91, 103; *Femmes illustres* in *La Science*, pp. 165, 202;

L'Honnête femme in *L'Autorité*, p. 74 and the last three together in *La Science*, p. 137.

^{viii} Philibert Papillon, who gives us, in his *Bibliothèque des auteurs de Bourgogne* (Dijon, 1742), one of the few contemporaneous mentions of Suchon and her work, states: 'Comme elle était extrêmement laborieuse, elle employait presque tout son temps à lire ou à écrire, et à enseigner des enfants.' (Quoted in Auffret, *La Contrainte*, p. 124)

^{ix} Geffriaud Rosso, p. 670.

^x Linda Timmermans, *L'Accès des femmes à la culture sous l'Ancien Régime* (Paris, Champion, 2005), p. 307 n. 185.

^{xi} Quotes in this article are taken from the 1646 edition. I have modernised the spelling to facilitate comprehension.

^{xii} Again it is difficult to know which edition Suchon might have read (it had already run to ten editions by 1640). The one used here for reference is: *La Cour sainte du R. père Nicolas Caussin... mise en un bel ordre, avec une notable augmentation des vies des personnes illustres de la cour, tant du vieil et du nouveau Testatment, et augmentée en cette dernière édition de la vie de l'auteur et de diverses histoires* (Paris, D. Bechet, 1653).

^{xiii} Le Moyne, for example, advocates female education but insists that 'afin d'apprendre ces leçons, il n'est point nécessaire qu'une Femme abandonne la conduite de son ménage, qu'elle fasse divorce avec son mari, qu'elle renonce aux plaisirs honnêtes & à la société civile, qu'elle s'enferme dans une chambre tapissée de cartes & meublées de sphères & d'Astrolabes' (*Gallerie*, p. 46), while Maillard simply states on the title page of *Le Bon Mariage ou le moyen d'être heureux et faire son salut en estat de mariage* (1647): 'ceux et celles qui font état de célibat ou de religion, connaîtront l'usage qu'ils peuvent avoir de ce livre en la seconde préface', hence

acknowledging that celibacy can be a valid choice outside religious institutions but he does not expend on the subject.

^{xiv} ‘Je ne suis pas la première, qui ait professé cette vie hors des cloîtres, & des Monastères; les plus anciennes vierges de la Chrétienté n’en ont point autrement usé, elles vivaient dans le monde quoi que hors du monde...La crainte de Dieu leur servait de rempart et sa protection de bouclier.’ (Caussin, *Sainte Isabelle*, p. 58)

^{xv} ‘Mais on dira qu’elle épouse une grille si elle ne veut un mari. J’avoue que l’état de religion est le plus excellent: mais si elle n’a point de vocation ce lui sera le plus désastreux.’ (Caussin, *Sainte Isabelle*, p.75)

Suchon: ‘Les vocations les plus parfaites peuvent être mauvaises pour ceux qui n’y sont pas destinés par Dieu ou qui n’en font pas un bon usage, changeant par leurs abus la médecine en poison.’ (*La Contrainte*, ed. by Auffret, p. 79)

^{xvi} ‘Quant aux filles qui ne sont point accommodées de biens temporels, elles ont plus de sujet d’embrasser la vie neutre, d’autant que le mariage sans moyens est très misérable, & que la porte des religions ne s’ouvre presque point aujourd’hui qu’avec la clef d’argent.’ (Caussin, *Sainte Isabelle*, p.87)

^{xvii} ‘De surplus, quoi que la Religieuse qui se dépouille de son bien, & donne à Dieu tout d’un coup l’arbre & les fruits, approche de plus près les perfections Apostoliques, toutefois celle qui n’ayant point de vocation, retient son bien pour l’employer à de très bons usages, se réserve une source perpétuelle de miséricordes, & charitables offices envers les pauvres.’ (Caussin, *Sainte Isabelle*, p. 85)

^{xviii} ‘Il y a mille occasions d’avancer la gloire de Dieu, qui sont arrêtées le plus souvent par faute de quelque secours temporel, qui peut procéder beaucoup plus facilement des dames et damoiselles, ou veuves, ou filles, qui vivent religieusement dans le monde. Le luxe qui est retranché de leur vie, donne à leur[s] charités plus de liberté de

s'élargir', (Caussin, *Sainte Isabelle*, p. 86)/'Enfin, c'est une providence de Dieu bien particulière d'avoir des âmes qui combattent le monde, non pas toujours en fuyant comme les Parthes, mais en l'attaquant de pied ferme, & le terrassant jusque dans sa propre maison.' (Caussin, *Sainte Isabelle*, p. 88)

^{xix} Sonia Bertolini, 'Gabrielle Suchon: une vie sans engagement', *Australian Journal of French Studies*, 37(3), 2000, 289 - 308.

^{xx} MacLean, p. 53.